

**EPISODE 1646**

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**FT:** So Money episode 1646, how to ace the job interview right now, with Hanna Howard, Senior Work Editor at CNBC Make It.

***HH:** You really have to make sure that your background is going to be clear the entire time, that they're going to be able to hear you and you won't have tech issues, that your Internet's going to work, that they can see you well and hear you well, and that you're not – that you're like looking at the camera.”*

[INTRO]

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**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. If you are looking for a job right now or suspect you will be this year, you may have your work cut out for you. It is a competitive landscape. For a myriad of reasons, employers are taking their time to hire right now. Call it the soft landing. I know we've been talking about the silent recession. Someone in the audience actually pointed out to me that maybe this is what a soft landing is supposed to feel like, this idea that the Federal Reserve went on this rate hike campaign to try to bring down inflation. Their goal is to avoid a full-blown recession and rather take us down a path where we're going to have what's called a soft landing, where things are going to be a little turbulent towards the end, but we're going to avoid total economic meltdown.

Right now, some of us are experiencing this sort of silent recession/soft landing, where we're looking for work, and it's taking time. Or we're at a job and we're worried about layoffs. Today's conversation turns to the job interview, how to best show up, whether you're applying virtually or in person. We have some specific advice for first-timers out there. If you're new to the job hunt, if you're new to the job interview experience, our guest today has loads of advice. She's Hanna Howard, Senior Work Editor at CNBC Make It.

CNBC has just launched a new online course venture called Smarter by CNBC Make It. The first paid course is called How to Ace Your Job Interview, and it gives people a leg up on the competition by pulling back the curtain on the hiring process and showing users how to excel at their job interview. Hanna and her team led this project. So she's here today sharing some of that advice, as well as the scripts, the actual things to say when you're in the job interview, the best questions to ask to further your chances of getting the job. I'll put the link for How to Ace Your Job Interview in our show notes if you'd like to check it out. Here's Hanna Howard.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Hanna Howard, welcome to So Money. It's great to sit down with a fellow journalist and talk shop. You got your ear to the ground, and you're working on some special projects with CNBC to help folks out there land a really good gig. Welcome to the show. I want to talk about the market climate, how you're seeing things pan out.

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**HH:** Yes. The job market is really interesting right now. We are seeing job growth slow a little bit more than people expected with the February jobs report. There are still a lot of job openings for the people who are looking for jobs, especially in government and healthcare. But we're also seeing those huge layoffs at big tech companies. It's really making people think, "What is happening here? Am I going to get a job if I am applying for a job?"

We are seeing a huge difference from a couple years ago when it seemed like everyone was just sort of snatching up job candidates left and right, giving them huge pay raises, giving them remote work, all those things that people were really looking for. It's still a good job market. It's not that blockbuster job market that we were seeing a couple years ago. So it does feel very different. It's a longer time to hire. Companies are being a little more cautious with their economic outlook. So maybe they're not hiring quite as much as well, especially now that we're not seeing those huge employment shortages that we are still seeing some in a few industries.

It really is sort of an uneasy time to be applying for a job, even though the numbers are still good. Unemployment is low. Yes, it's a little weird out there.

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**FT:** It doesn't feel like it's a great time to be quitting because you don't want to necessarily be in the position of – being in the job market, to your point, it is taking longer. I know that the Labor Department usually does release an average of how many months it's taking for someone to find a job. I haven't checked that, but I just know from people that are in my orbit looking for work. It's taking many months. These are really qualified people. They're trying to get jobs at big companies where there's probably a lot of layers, so six interviews, seven interviews.

Hang in there, everybody. We – thoughts and prayers. But more than thoughts and prayers, Hanna, you're going to give us some really good advice on how to navigate the job market and specifically once you're in the interview, which can be really nervous for a lot of people, especially first-timers out there, people who are graduating, getting their first job interview. Tell us first that you've been packaging this advice on CNBC. Tell us a little bit about where we can find that information.

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**HH:** Yes. We are always doing that sort of work coverage at CNBC Make It. This year in January, we launched our first-ever course, which is called How to Ace Your Job Interview. It's three great experts who are sharing their advice on everything from how to show up, whether that's in person, how to prepare yourself for virtual interview, how to answer some of those really common questions that can trip people up, and even how to follow up because that is still a very important step.

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**FT:** Are more people having job interviews virtually or in person right now?

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**HH:** I don't know what the split is, but people are definitely having a lot of virtual interviews. It helps companies to be able to interview people who are maybe not in the area. Especially if you're hiring for a remote role, you might not be looking at the local job seekers specifically. It helps people. It helps employers interview people who are all over the place. It also gives a little more flexibility in terms of time, location, that sort of thing.

With virtual job interviews, a lot of the tips are, honestly, the same as an in-person interview. I think that in our sort of hybrid workforce now, some of those layers have been flattened between in-person and remote. There's certainly still a divide. But in terms of the interview, you're still trying to prepare for knowing what the company does and what the industry is all about. Preparing for those specific questions they're going to ask because they're going to ask them, whether you're in person or remote.

The thing about being remote is you really have to make sure that your background is going to be clear the entire time, that they're going to be able to hear you and you won't have tech issues, that your Internet's going to work, that they can see you well and hear you well, and that you're not – that you're looking at the camera. They are sort of looking for signals that you will be as effective virtually as you can be in person, especially if you are interviewing for a hybrid or a remote job.

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**FT:** That's a good point. That's a good point. If you've got roommates, kick them out for a little bit. If you've got a barking dog, get someone to walk her for that half an hour. I remember I was interviewing somebody. I was working at a company, and I was in charge of – I was on the hiring team for this, and this was a couple years ago. The person was interviewing virtually but was in a messy bedroom. I don't know if it was a pajama top or if it was a fashion statement because sometimes you can wear a shirt that looks like a pajama. But I was like maybe not the right choice for a job interview because, I mean.

Fortunately, I was a little up on the trends. I was like, "Oh, that looks like at a leisure situation. But you got to be really mindful of these details. You're so right that because if you're doing a lot

of that work remotely, that's your future that you want to position it in. Encourage them that this is going to be – you're going to have a serious place to sit down and do the work.

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**HH:** Yes, absolutely. I love your point about the messy bedroom. It sort of ties into one of the things that our experts talk about, which is this fundamental attribution error which is basically like if you're late to an interview, they won't think of that as, “Oh, this person probably hit traffic or had issues with the subway.” They're going to think this person is late and cannot be on time.

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**FT:** It reflects other things about them. Maybe they're late with handing in assignments. Or they don't pay attention to details. It's not fair, but these are the assumptions that are going on all the time and are very prevalent in the workforce. For someone especially meeting you for the first time, an interview is really like everyone is judging everybody. That's it. It's – you're on –

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**HH:** You have a short amount of time to make those judgments, too. A lot of times, you only have half an hour to meet with someone, ask them some questions, get some questions from them. Then they're out the door, and you have to sort of make a decision about am I interested in moving this person forward in the process or am I not. That's not a lot of time to make those judgments, so you do have to make those snap judgments. You're really trying to make sure that your interviewer is making the best possible snap judgments about you.

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**FT:** Right. A lot of people looking for jobs right now are coming out of transition. They came from maybe not having work for a while because they had been laid off or had stepped out of the workforce to take care of family, whatever the reason. Burnout, a huge reason a lot of people quit in the last couple of years. As I would expect, an employer may say like, “How's it going? How have you been? What have you been doing the last six months,” or however they frame it.

What's the best way to shape that narrative if you do feel a little insecure because you haven't been "working" in that corporate environment or in a similar environment for some time?

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**HH:** Sure. I mean, I think that it comes down to a couple things. One of them is skills, making sure that you can show that you have the skills that they are looking for and showing how you've been keeping up. Most people, even if they are out of their industry for a while, if you have an interest in what's going on in your industry, you can show how you've been keeping up with the latest development, how maybe you've been building some skills outside of the traditional workplace that go hand in hand with where that industry is going in the future.

You can show that you've been thinking about these things, that you've been keeping up, and also showing that you have the confidence that once you join a workplace that you can get in there quickly and start showing your impact. Companies want someone who is confident that they can hit the ground running and that they are immediately going to be making their influence known in that workforce. So showing that you have those skills, that you're keeping up, and that you know that you can hit the objectives that they're looking for you.

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**FT:** You said influence, and I'm just thinking. What if you are somebody who wants to work somewhere but have influence outside of work in other ways? Whether that's you want to have a TikTok or you want to actually be an active member of some organization or side hustle, are these the sort of things that you need to bring up in an interview or test to see whether this is a good cultural fit that they would be supportive of you outside of your work to be your own person? Maybe have a different identity.

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**HH:** Yes. I mean, it really is about how you bring it up. But I think if that is important to you, you have to gauge that that company is going to be the right fit for you. Because if you are building an influencer career, if you have a side hustle, you don't want to suddenly be in a place where

they're saying you cannot do that or you will lose your job or whatever other ramifications might come into play. It really is about asking questions delicately, I think. You do have to be tactful about how you're asking these questions. You don't want to just be like, "I have a side hustle, and that takes priority for me," because they're going to say, "They're not going to care about the work they're doing here."

If you're asking about for people who have priorities outside of work, what is the culture like in terms of work-life balance, how do you support your employees not just in the workplace but as full humans who have other interests, who have other priorities? Because that also might be if you have a family or if you have other – if you have volunteer work that you're really excited to do. It's not always a monetary thing, but you do have to make sure that you're going to be in a workforce that is supporting those things. You could even probably ask your interviewer, "How do you feel like this company and the work you're doing empowers you to be your full self outside of the workplace, too?"

People also like talking about themselves and talking about their other interests. If someone is saying like, "I see you as someone who's coming to work very confident, is a full person, talks about their interests, how does your work support that?" I'd be like, "You know what? That's a great question, and I'll tell you how, and it has to do with my working hours and the people that I work with and the way that we're able to show up for each other at work." If there's a good work culture, a lot of interviewers want to brag about that.

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**FT:** You reminded me of a tip I once learned, which was that when you're in a job interview and if the interviewer, the company, the employer, the HR rep spends a lot of time talking during your interview, it's probably a good interview because they left feeling good about it. To your point, if someone's really passionate and talking and excited and losing track of time, they think it went well, right? They're happy and that reflects well on you.

We talked about one tricky question, which is how have you been filling maybe the void on your work resume. What are some other hard questions that you find job applicants have a difficulty navigating? I would think that like give me an example of a challenge or something that you've

overcome or what's your weakness. Gosh, I hate that question. In your video course, How to Ace Your Job Interview, which also comes with a workbook, you talk about exactly what to say. Here are the scripts. You do it for us. But I would love for you to walk us through some of those examples.

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**HH:** Yes. I think that what is your biggest weakness is a textbook example of this because it is one of those really hard questions to answer when you are trying to come from a place of strength and confidence in your interview. A lot of people tend to lean back on these answers that are fake, basically, where it's sort of like, "Oh, I work too hard. I'm too detail-oriented." People are like, "That's not really a weakness. You're just trying to brag about yourself but be self-deprecating."

The thing that our experts said that I really love is that you can be honest about what your weaknesses are, but you also have to be honest about how you're working on them. No one just wants to hear, "I'm really bad at time management," and have that be it because they're going to say, "This person is bad at time management, and I don't want to hire them for that reason." But if you say, "I'm really bad at time management, so I've put in place these systems that keep me on time for meetings, that make sure that I can remember when everything is happening during the week, that make sure I'm hitting deadlines. I'm using this project management system where I can keep track of all my work and when it's due and have alarm set up." If you can show that you are working on that, that is the best way to talk about a weakness because everyone has weaknesses. It's really how you approach those weaknesses in the workplace that they're looking for.

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**FT:** Yes. I appreciate that, and I wish question would almost just say that. Like, "We understand that everybody has weaknesses or things that they are working on or improvement. What is an example of that, and how are you addressing it?" Perfect.

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**HH:** Yes. That would be a much better way to ask the question.

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**FT:** A lot more thoughtful and I think empathetic way to ask the question, as opposed to tell – because then it's very triggering. Just tell us your flaws. Like, “Okay, I've totally lost the interview,” which for somebody who is nervous who's going in for the first time, that question can really set you off. So advice for the younger cohort of applicants out there who are maybe in this for the first time. It gets easier as we know, showing up for yourself in a job interview, fielding questions. Then, of course, talking about money, negotiating. I would suspect that still with the younger job applicants, they're not asking for more money than what they're being offered. It happened to the best of us. Tell us some of the mistakes or some of the things to look out for as you are doing this maybe for the first time.

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**HH:** I think when you're doing it for the first time, it's all about preparation and feeling confident. So it is going over some of those common questions, making sure you're doing your research. I think that a lot of us get our first job interview advice from our parents who are very well-meaning but maybe have not interviewed for a job in the same way that we are for a while. So searching out common experience from your peer group is also really important for people who are just starting out. Get your friend's insight who interviewed for an internship last summer or is interviewing for a job soon. What did they hear? What went well for them? What didn't go well for them? Practice with your friends. Get into the –

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**FT:** Zeitgeist.

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**HH:** Yes. Get into the zeitgeist. Also, get into a routine of practicing those things. Some experts recommend recording yourself when you're talking so that you can sort of see where you stumble, where you're not feeling as confident. Also, one of the things that is maybe less tangible but something that our experts talk about is remembering that you and the interviewer are not adversaries. You want to get hired. They are looking for someone to hire. They do not want to be in an endless hiring cycle. They are hoping that they find the right candidate.

Really, with every interview, they're hoping that that person is the right candidate. So remembering that they are on your side, they want you to do well. They are not hoping that you're going to slip up or make errors. Every time a new candidate walks in the door, hopes are high. That can help a lot with the nervousness because you're not going into enemy territory. You are going to a workplace that you were hoping to work for with someone you are hoping will be your boss or coworker. Start thinking about that relationship, even in the interview stage.

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**FT:** If you're virtual, you have a little Post-it which is bulleted, the three things you want to make sure you convey, which you wouldn't have that in a – well, maybe you could have something written down on your lap. I think that's fine. I think it's fine to even go into a physical interview with a couple of notes because you're going in there. You're not going in reading off a script, but maybe there are just – you only have so much time. You want to make sure you optimize for that time. There are questions that you want to also ask before you leave.

I think that when I was first starting out in the job market, I hated when they would ask me, “So do you have any questions?” I always felt so put on the spot and also like, “What? What?” It just didn't – because I think I was going in with that adversarial mindset of like, “Well, who am I to have any questions for this company? I should be so lucky to be in this position of maybe getting hired. Who cares what the answers are to my questions? It's a job, and it's a warm job, so I'm going to take it.”

Obviously, times have changed. Even back then, I think someone should have mentored me better. But what are the questions that people should have? I think that can also be a great way

to demonstrate your talent and your way of analyzing and kind of your personality, too, in these very specific questions that you'll direct at the employer during a job interview.

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**HH:** Yes. I think one great question to ask is tell me how decisions are made on the team. That can tell you a lot about not only how the team works but whether you're going to like how the team works. A work reporter on my team, Jennifer Liu, actually talked to someone about this recently. What you're finding out there is how are things managed. Is everything top-down? Is there a more collaborative environment when decisions are being made? Are there a lot of layers of approvals that things have to go through and things are a little slow or log-jammed?

Then what you learn is do I like when decisions are made top-down? Am I someone who just wants to be told what to do, so I can execute and just sort of do it and move on? Or am I someone who really wants to make sure that in team decisions, my voice is being heard, I'm able to give my input, and that it really feels like each member of the team was contributing? I think that's a great question to ask. I think asking questions about the culture.

One of the questions that I like to ask is what's your favorite part of this job and what's your least favorite part of this job. Or is there anything that you really love about this job that I would not find out from the job listing?

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**FT:** A question we should also ask is what is your budget. Or how do we come up with the money question? Obviously, now employers are less likely to ask you about your job income history. It's illegal in some states. Obviously, you're going to talk about money at some point, and so I always say let the employer lead and show their cards first. But how do you get them to show their cards if nobody's – if you're both stalling, staring at each other.

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**HH:** Our experts are still saying they should bring it up first. You never want to give a number first. It really is asking that budget question. What's the budget range for this role? One thing that recruiters like to say is when you have the range, also ask what sets apart the person making the top of this range from the person making the bottom of this range. So that then you can show how your skills and expertise put you toward the higher end of that range. It's always going to – I mean, hopefully not always.

We are hopeful that maybe we can work toward a place where it is not as awkward to bring up, and it doesn't feel like this awkward dance. But it still kind of is and asking the budget range question, especially if you're having conversations with recruiters and the HR people, because then you don't get into as much of the interpersonal dynamic that you might be working with in your day-to-day work. Also, they're probably going to have the best answers for those questions.

A lot of times, the person who's going to be your direct manager, even though they are the one who's hiring for the role, sometimes they don't have that budget information right in front of them at the time that they're interviewing you.

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**FT:** Right. Another question I have is about your online profile. Obviously, you've submitted information before getting this interview, whether it was your resume, your LinkedIn. Depending on the job, maybe there was a video required. I don't know. But a lot of us have, as we were talking about earlier, online profiles, whether that's on social media or a blog or something. How important is that to be careful of what we're saying online? I guess, are employers doing their due diligence or even just exploring candidates online? Are they going into just Google and putting in your name and seeing what comes up?

I know that when it comes to college applications, this is something that we have heard counselors advise students. Just be sure that your online profile reflects your best self so that – because that is something that they may be looking into. How often does that actually happen in the job market?

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**HH:** It varies based on industry. We work in media. Certainly, it is pretty easy and pretty standard to just put someone's name into Google. Look at them on Instagram. Look at their LinkedIn. Look at their X account. I feel like that's pretty standard. I would say that you should just assume that they're going to do that. They might not do it. I think it's probably best to just assume that they will. In that sense, I don't think it's ever a bad thing to over-prepare and make sure that your Web presence looks good to an employer. The downside is so much higher than the effort that you're putting in to make sure that your tweets are okay or that you aren't saying something crazy on Instagram.

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**FT:** Yes, yes, yes. It's because you – here's the other thing is we never want to be misunderstood or judged based on our opinions. In the workplace, we would like to think that that's a neutral place, right? We can all come to work together, regardless of our opinions and our views of politics, whatever. But we live in a world that the floodgates are open, and anyone can see, and anyone can judge for themselves. It's just unfortunate that's the reality.

What are we going to do? Are we going to censor ourselves? No. But we're going to have to just keep that in mind as we're interviewing that that could – it wouldn't come up necessarily in the interview. Gosh, we live in a judgmental world, so that's just – it is what it is. Part for the course, I guess. Maybe it works out. I don't want to work somewhere maybe where they don't really – we're not a fit.

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**HH:** Right. Yes. I think that's a great point. For the most part, you don't want to work somewhere that is not going to accept the person that you are. Maybe they're going to be like, "We accept the person that you are, and we prefer that because you have a public-facing role that you are not showing as much of that person on social media." Ultimately, it is. You're trying to find a fit for you, as well as a company trying to find a fit for them. It really is about showing your best

self. Sometimes, that does mean curating the self that you show to every person who's on Instagram.

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**FT:** Yes. I talk about this in *A Healthy State of Panic*, the fear of exposure and not everyone deserves your full truth. You have to read the room. I've been in meetings where I could have shared some things, but I didn't because I wasn't with my girlfriends. I was with people who were in a much different position who – the stakes were different in that room for me. So I'm going to show up and show just the version of myself that makes the most sense in that room.

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**HH:** Yes, absolutely.

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**FT:** Gosh, could we be any vaguer?

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**HH:** Yes.

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**FT:** I'm trying to stay out of trouble, out of hot water here. The interview's over. I want to now talk about post-interview. This is as important as what you do in the interview, the communication. I would say be proactive, right? Reach out. Be thankful. Follow up. As your life gets – as you update your life, whether it's even you take on another job, and they haven't gone back to you yet, is it courtesy to let them know?

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**HH:** Yes, absolutely. You may not get a response all the time, especially if you're reaching out proactively with an update. But if they are taking a long time, those are still good data points for them to have, even if you're sort of saying, "My role has changed," or, "Here's something new that I've published," or, "Here's a new responsibility that I've taken on that I think aligns really well with what you're hiring for." I think it is a courtesy to do it, and it is a nice thing to do, and it's one of those things that I don't think can really have a huge downside.

I would say it's sort of positive to neutral impact if you were saying – if you're sending that sort of update, definitely positive impact to reach out right after your interview proactively to say, "Thank you for the interview. I really enjoyed talking with you about X, Y, Z thing. I'm really excited about moving forward in this process," that sort of thing.

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**FT:** Yes. It's such a wild west out there, Hanna. I feel like anything can happen after the interview. You cannot hear from them for months. They can tell you that they've moved on and then come back. It's happened to a friend of mine where they said, "Well, we went with it. We went in a different direction." So she went in a different direction. Then they came back a few weeks later and said, "Actually, we've opened up a second position. We'd like you to fill it." But by then, she was – for her, that felt like a red flag a little bit, like this company is a little all over the place. But I think she had also come from a place where there were many, many red flags. So I think she just wanted something really simple and straightforward, and this didn't feel like a good fit for her.

Then in another case, I remember myself. I was trying to get a raise at my company years ago. I didn't get it, and I just felt like I'd like hit a wall there, and so I left. A couple of months tops into that new job, my old boss calls and says, "Hey, would you be willing to come back?" I considered it. I said, "Well, what's the – what are you going to pay me?" They couldn't match even what I was making at the new company, so it just didn't – not to mention it would have been really horrible for me to leave, and I would have burned serious bridges. But it was just not even financially exciting.

That just goes to show you that anything goes, and I'm so glad that I didn't leave that first company in flames because I really wanted to. I was really upset with everybody there for not supporting me and giving me the raise and all the things. It's important in your career to just take the high road, play nice, nice, and move on if something is not working, as opposed to staying there and fighting. Fighting what's not working.

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**HH:** Yes. That's very true. You do have to be strategic about the bridges you burn.

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**FT:** Yes. I mean, look, I'm 44 now. I'm like, "Some bridges might best be burned."

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**HH:** Yes, absolutely. Some situations, you don't want anything from those people or that company ever again.

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**FT:** That's a hot take because some people are very much in the camp of, "Oh, no. You never know. You just never know." I'm like, "Well, I know enough. I've seen enough. I've heard enough. I've experienced enough. This bridge is over. It's the bridge to nowhere." Oh, well. This was fun. Thank you, Hanna. Thank you so much. Tell us a little bit more about the video series, walking people through the job interview process.

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**HH:** Yes. It's about 100 minutes of video content. It comes with a companion workbook, so you can work through those common questions on your own time. We just launched our second course this week as well, which is how to make passive income online. We're really just trying to help people be more successful and confident in their work life, with their money, and all that.



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**FT:** We'll be sure to put the links to both of those programs. You might need to do both, honestly, in this market. You need to – you got to parallel path that. It's just weird out there, as we said.

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**HH:** It really is about persistence and keeping at it if you are applying for jobs, highlighting those skills, making sure things are updated, being proactive about getting the opportunities that you can.

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**FT:** Well, we're grateful for you. Hanna Howard, thank you so much, Senior Work Editor at Make It. The program, the first paid course, is called How to Ace Your Job Interview. Check out the second course which is on passive income. We'll put those links in our show notes.

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**HH:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Thanks so much for tuning in. Thanks to Hanna Howard from CNBC Make It for joining us. I'll see you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh. I hope your day is So Money.

[END]

